Disney Girlhood: Princess Generations and *Once Upon a Time*

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The fairy tale as we know it today is a ghost of what it once was. Gone are the bloody *Cinderella* of Charles Perrault (1697), the Grimm brothers' macabre *Snow White* (1812) and Hans Christian Andersen's mournful *Little Mermaid* (1836). The narratives that most people today associate with these princesses are not these, but rather, those of the Disney animated feature films. Uplifting musical scores, inhumanly svelte heroines, and largely bloodless resolutions have replaced the original tales in the public imaginary. And in their Disney forms, these fairy tales — and their associated merchandising — seem especially directed at young girls, and importantly, the nostalgic girl-that-was. Disney markets not simply to the current generation of girls, but to women who came of age watching various Disney princesses do the same. Disney sells visions of youthful girlhood to women of all ages, constructing girl identity as a set of clearly identifiable ideals that operate along the lines of contemporary norms.

First and foremost, Disney girlhood is Western. For many scholars, the now almost ubiquitous canon of Disney princess films represents, more specifically, an Americanization of the fairy tale. The pseudo-medieval kingdoms of the early Princess films, *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), are understood, from this perspective, to represent nostalgia for an uncomplicated, deracialized, edenic prehistory that, of course, erased America's colonial past and its violent national history. The Disney fairy tale, like all speculative fictions, opened a door — but this door was not to a possible alternate present or future, but to a possible alternate history in which the scars of American history, including those of racial genocide and Civil and World Wars, could be washed away, restoring the innocence of a mythical national childhood: "an imaginary time in an imaginary past" (Tavin and Anderson 22). Beyond this, Naomi Wood argues that the eventual victory of the Disney heroine always comes to evoke that of "the morally right over the temporally powerful" (26). And the "morally right" within these early fairy tales is often presented in heavy- handed, gendered terms.

The emphasis on romance as rescue is, according to Wood, a classic marker of Disney Americanization. The most distinctive quality of the Disney fairy tale adaptation is the way in which the domestic sphere is specifically gendered and the cheerful acceptance of such tasks as housekeeping, care of the

self, and care of others, along with clearly associated virtues of patience and tolerance, is rewarded. Discussing *Cinderella* as exemplary, in this respect, of the Disney early princess films, Wood writes:

> Mirroring other aspects of American ideology, Disney's *Cinderella* offers the quasi-religious reassurance that hard work, clean living, self-control, and adherence to the ideal will produce the desired result, in this case, appropriate to the American Dream for Girls: rich and handsome Mr. Right (34).

In other words, conforming to a rigid set of patriarchal gender norms — namely passivity and self-regulation — the American girl can construct an image of domesticity desirable to the all-American male. By such adjustments patriarchal gender norms are strictly adhered to in the scope of Disney's conservative, American framework for the fairy tale. The Disney fairy tale thus offers a heteronormative, conservative reconstruction of romance for girls: cultivate yourself in the image of the Disney princess, and you can achieve the ultimate goal — marriageability.

Considering the implications of the longevity of the simplistic 'Princess' storyline, in 1993 Jeanne Dubino alluded to a "Cinderella Complex," which drives young women to cultivate domesticity and beauty above all else, in the hopes of achieving future romantic bliss, and encourages a broad cultural belief that this is a valid life goal for young women. Years earlier, in 1981, Colette Dowling had argued that this complex becomes a problem for a young woman "when — after she has begun to move out, to expand, to raise her sights — she discovers that the rules have changed and she will no longer be rewarded for her compliance, as she has been, systematically, since she was a little girl" (41).

The timing here is important. In the early 1980s, with young women finally able to take advantage of changes put in place by second-wave feminism, some distinct generational differences in terms of opportunity and capacity for lifestyle choices became apparent. Dowling, and the experts she interviewed, saw this as partly responsible for the confusion that seemed to be widely felt by contemporary girls:

> I think we underestimate the amount of conflict today's women experience as a result of having mothers who, more often than not, have led far less independent — indeed, quite submissive — lives. For the woman who has ostensibly turned her back on the life her mother represents, there can be true grief, an inner flailing. The dilemma is no less affecting for being largely unconscious. (41)

Here Dowling flags the figure of Cinderella — and, as the arguments above have made clear, *Disney's* Cinderella, specifically — as representing an identity

that existed before the advances made by women's rights. She is placing Cinderella (and, thereby, Snow White and Aurora too) in the same cultural space as the foremothers of the second wave. These early Disney princesses, and their cheerful passivity, represent for Dowling the ingrained and continuing glamorization of patriarchal gender roles within her mother's life, and therefore, by default, her own culture. It is important that Dowling rejects these princesses of an earlier age, while at the same time remaining conflicted about what they represent — for her mother, clearly, but also for her, as a woman moving away from this nostalgic promise of domestic bliss. In the early 1980s, Cinderella becomes a name for an anxiety about the lessons handed down to girls of emerging generations — what are we to make of our mother's princesses?

It is worthwhile, then, to consider the nostalgic princesses of today. After second-wave feminism, and after Dowling, a new kind of princess emerged. *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992) offered a narrative that revolved around rebellion, self-knowledge, and choice, seemingly reflecting or responding to a different political climate. In an age of Riot Grrrl, emerging 'third-wave' feminism, and on the verge of 'Girl Power' (noted first in the media as a US Health and Human Services campaign in 1996), the girl was now a point of convergence for conflicting debates about risk and empowerment. The princesses of the past, with their single-facet characterizations and uncomplicated romantic trajectories, would no longer be enough to draw in Disney's target audience. Instead, Disney appears to have drawn on the public imaginary, constructing an image of girlhood appropriate to its time, beginning with Ariel—famously modelled on It Girl of the period, Marisa Tomei. The result was twofold: tremendous financial success, and a burgeoning princess renaissance for Disney. *The Little Mermaid* launched Disney into a new era of marketing and merchandise centered entirely on the Disney princess "canon," making the brand so popular it has sparked a trend that some, like Rebecca Hains, have labelled "Princess Culture."

Disney Princess products now include paraphernalia that extend from dolls, to games, to clothing: almost every aspect of everyday life can now be colonized by one's favorite princess. And Disney's reach as a media and merchandising conglomerate is more extensive today than at any of the other pinnacles of its popularity: at the height of Mickey Mouse's cinema career (1935-1940), when the original Disneyland opened (1955), or even during the princess film renaissance (1989-1998). Much of today's media production and merchandising is directed particularly at girls. Girls can wear authentic princess dresses licensed by Disney, dream of one day actually being married in Cinderella's castle at Disneyworld (Wood 42), play with princess dolls

distributed with McDonald's happy meals, watch princess-themed television programming on the Disney Channel, or play princess games at the Disney website. As Tavin and Anderson point out,

> Disney's corporate holdings allow it to wield an enormous amount of power through the construction and regulation of the nation's media-cultural space (Shiller, 1994). Within this space, Disney promotes itself through spirals of referentiality. In this sense, Disney refers back to itself through its own media outlets and subsidiaries in an effort to advertise and advance its own cause. (23)

Disney has constructed a media empire, and the princesses are the jewels in its crown. Disney Princesses© is now a franchise in and of itself, with new princesses being introduced to its canon with every film.

For Hains and others, the rise of "Princess Culture" means a throwback to the docile, marriage-focused princesses of the past, arguing that it is a continuing and prolific source of "psychologically unhealthy" and "economically detrimental" attitudes. In a political moment now often referred to as 'postfeminist' — a popular term that conveys a sense of achievement misguidedly negating any further need for feminism while referencing a nebulously contemporary era starting around the late 1990s — these narratives seem incongruous. "Stories about princesses," Hains writes, "have long underscored the presumed weakness of females and implied that helplessness is romantically desirable. These tales reflected the way our society encourages girls to learn dependency and helplessness, believing that a man will someday take care of them" (161). The current popularity, then — not only of Ariel and Belle but of Cinderella and Snow White too — is problematic. And the romantic idealization of girlish passivity is not the only problem feminist critics have identified with this franchise. In recent decades critics have often suggested that Disney princesses further an implicit white privilege in their lack of diversity. Even the pointedly 'ethnic' Disney princesses, such as Mulan and Pocahontas, rarely feature in the corporate 'lineup' used in marketing Disney Princess products. The ostensible reason is that their attire is less 'princessy' (Orenstein qtd. in Sweeney 69). But, as Hains and others point out, the lesser visibility of the 'non-white' princesses within the Disney Princess franchise, both on screen and in toys and other merchandising, associates beauty and desirability with the skin colors, hair types, and clothing styles of upper class whiteness throughout history, thereby sending a message to girls that these are the only standards they should aspire to (Hains 208).

If, as Hains and so many others suggest, "Princess Culture" is coded with traditional patriarchal values, white privilege, and unrealistic standards of

beauty at the forefront, what is to be made of the princess craze reaching a new peak during the era of Girl Power? Princesses like Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*) and Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*) were certainly coded as 'modern' women because of their feisty attitudes and rejection of some societal norms. Ariel, for example, likes humans more than her own sea-creature people; Belle likes books more than boys. But in the end their stories are tales of self-sacrifice in the interest of heterosexual love. Laura Sells calls *The Little Mermaid* "a bourgeois feminist success story in which access [to the patriarchal world] is achieved with minimal cost" (181). Certainly much more attention was paid in the Disney princess renaissance to the personal goals of the heroines, alongside the inevitable dreams of true love also apparent in the early princess films. Ariel wants to experience the human world; Belle specifically states her desire for adventure; and Jasmine wants more independence. However, these goals are finally achieved *through* the heterosexual romances at the heart of these stories.

It is particularly notable, then, that the later princesses of this period, Pocahontas (1995) and Mulan (1998), are driven by concerns that are less individualistic or even less familial, including their commitment to tribe, nation, or environment. Their storylines also require much more agency on their part to achieve their goals. Pocahontas even eventually rejects her possible romance for her family — a no less traditional ending, perhaps, but still markedly different. While their more personal quests tell stories that differentiate them from the narratives of natural virtue of the 'white' princesses, I would also argue that these two princesses represent Anita Harris' (2004) "can-do" girl of the Girl Power era. Their difference from the unnegotiated Disney princess idea allows them to come closer to the 'postfeminist' ideal of neoliberal empowerment — success achieved through personal choices and self-knowledge — that is only hinted at by the earlier princesses of this period. It's therefore significant, and consistent with the ambivalence critics note in the postfeminist girl idea, that the personal quests of these princesses are closely entangled with heterosexual romance that refers the story back to ideals of female beauty and virtue. They are perhaps less girls that can have it all than girls that must do it all. Notably, their individual heroism as well as their 'diversity' may contribute to the way these characters are often played down by the corporate "Princess" franchise.

Despite some of the more progressive characteristics of these new princesses, the very successful merchandise — dolls, games, clothes, toys, and so on — based on these films is "almost always about beauty and romance, to the exclusion of all other attributes" (Hains 177). Karen Wohlwend points out that, rather than promoting the narratives themselves, these products are centered on an "emphasized femininity," which "legitimates the construction

of girls as objects of display" (65). In this respect, too, "Princess Culture" was well-placed to align with — and profit from — the changing perception of girls as empowered consumers. Princess products, like the Spice Girls (1998) or any other franchise marketing to girls at the time, sold a watered down notion of Girl Power that traded on the perceived pleasures of embodied femininity. In the construction of "Princess Culture" as we know and experience it today, Disney was very much in dialogue with postfeminist discourse.

It is not surprising, then, that girlhood is opposed, in the Disney films, to both masculinity and older women. While the villain is often an overbearing male, attempting to smother (Frollo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) or possess (Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*) the girl protagonist, the force of evil in these narratives is also very often a villainess who regards herself or her kin as a sexual rival for the girl. Often that villainess is some version of a matriarch. And while the princess is accorded the qualities of emphasized femininity explored above, her competitors are portrayed as possessing alternative physical traits and qualities coded as bad. Evil characters such as the Stepmother from *Cinderella* or Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* are given dark skin and short or tightly pulled back hair. Ursula is plump and buxom — a trait emphasized grotesquely to suggest sexual *over*-availability — while the stepmother's features are sharp and pinched, implying frigidity and even masculinity. Compared to the pale, shapely, virginal young heroines, these female figures are clearly meant to present an image of 'bad' femininity: femininity lost with age, femininity oversexualized, femininity gone wrong. Meanwhile, often orphaned and friendless, Disney princesses are rarely if ever given female allies, and when they are, as Tavin and Anderson point out, these "are frequently represented as non-sexualized magical beings such as wise grandmothers and fairy godmothers. These characters often comfort the traumatized love-stricken young heroines and sacrifice themselves to ensure heterosexual normalization" (24). Hains argues that "Princess Culture" "presents girls not just as waiting for a prince, but as waiting alone — isolated — without the support of maternal figures or female friends" (12), and certainly it is only in the most recent Disney films, *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2014), and the part live-action part-CGI-animation *Maleficent* (2014) that princesses have been given a female support system.

It is necessary to understand the ways in which Disney constructs girlhood historically — and in opposition to other forms of femininity — to examine the ways in which Disney interacts with the feminist narrative. I argue that the Disney films of the 1990s offer an insight into the way in which girlhood was being singled out as an object of postfeminist discourse, and what are currently

referred to as the successive 'waves' of feminism were being conceptualized as generations. Postfeminism, that is, bound changing ideas about girls to ideas about 'daughters' in a mother-daughter relationship, ideas which, I believe, are again being renegotiated now—even within Disney princess films themselves. As I suggested above, the newest princess features, *Brave* and *Frozen*, forego the traditional romance narrative in favor of stories of female familial bonding. While *Brave* sees Merida struggling to appreciate the traditional, protective values of her mother (and vice versa), *Frozen's* princess Elsa must mend her relationship with her sister, Anna, after years spent hiding a dangerous secret. *Frozen* is, in itself, remarkable for actively critiquing the traditional romance narrative of past Disney princess films by mocking the idea of love-at-first-sight and turning the traditional prince figure into a villain. In the end, *true love* in *Frozen* is recoded as sisterly love, and in the great rescue scene the sisters save each other. This Disney film — the second, after *Brave*, to be directed by a woman — essentially subverts the entire set of tropes the Disney franchise is based on. If Disney can be made a site for subversion, then perhaps the traditionalist gender roles encoded therein can be broken down within the franchise as well.

In *Brave*, however, not only is the romantic princess plotline rejected, romance is excluded altogether, with Merida successfully refusing the courtship and marriage objective set out for her, not in order to choose someone else but in order to choose to be herself. The plot focus is instead on Merida's quest to reconcile with (and thereby rescue) her mother. This film begins by stressing the opposition between these two generations, not specifically because Merida and her mother have different social values-although they do, and must reach a shared middle ground in the end — but because they are unable to acknowledge each other's separate identities. Their failures in communication spark the crisis that necessitates their quest, and this problem is what must be resolved in order for normality to be restored. In the end, they learn to understand each other, and through their new rapport, Merida is allowed to express her individuality in ways that her mother was unable to as a girl. This is a plotline that clearly takes into account generational tensions and anxieties surrounding girlhood which have now long been informed by postfeminist discourse.

Nevertheless, in the context of "Princess Culture," many of these new approaches to the Disney princess narrative were subsumed in the marketing furor surrounding the products based on their films. As Hains and others have noted, Merida's famously wild hair and more realistic waistline were reined in prior to her 'coronation' as an official Disney princess. This decision was later reversed after fierce controversy (Hains 180), in an interesting development

that suggests a certain reflexivity within the assumed market of girl-and-parent consumers; an unwillingness to allow 'hyperfemininity' to overshadow the new attributes of these princess stories. However, one thing is clear: the marketing behemoth of the Disney princess line is not shying away from patriarchal norms just yet. As Hains puts it,

> Within the brand, old-fashioned, classic princesses like Snow White and Cinderella are on equal (or superior!) footing compared with princesses like Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, Anna and Elsa, who bring more modern values to the franchise. So when little girls love princesses, they become exposed to the princess behavior and attitudes that hearken back to the social norms of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. And in the princess toys and other products that exist beyond the confines of the screen, princess culture's dial is still set firmly on the 'pretty and passive' setting — even for the newest of princesses. (165)

It is therefore clear that consideration of the impact of Disney princesses is as relevant today as it was during the rise of Girl Power or the generations before, if not more so, given the continuously growing scope of Disney's empire.

What I find most problematic is that Disney princess marketing *dehistoricizes* texts that otherwise, taken together, might be seen to offer a timeline of changing hegemonic American notions of girlhood, however problematic or incomplete their feminist potential at any point. The Disney Princess line limits girls' opportunities to be engaged in the necessary meaning-making processes of watching the films contextually. Instead, it presents all princesses, as Hains says, "on equal footing," thereby robbing the presumed audience of otherwise clear shifts away from the pre-second-wave visions of girlhood in the early Disney princess films and even away from those partly shaped by the emergence of postfeminist discourse.

This cycle is also perpetuated by the way in which Disney now trades (as it has for generations) on the nostalgic identification of girls of the 1990s — now often mothers of girls themselves. In addition to bringing their own daughters into the fantasy world of their youth, these 'grown-up girls' are also being marketed to themselves. Meghan Sweeney points out that

> In recent years, Disney has extended the reach of its Princess line by developing new products geared to adult consumers: as the blurb on one book states: "Every little girl has a favorite Disney Princess — and for that matter, every grown-up girl, too!" (The Art). The idea is that the princess archetype, given its contours by Disney, offers the possibility of romance and transformation for females of all ages. Most notable, perhaps, is the variety of wedding options Disney offers to grown-up

> Princess enthusiasts, including wedding rides in Cinderella's coach and designer wedding gowns that echo those of the Princesses. By donning glamorous (trademarked) frills — by playing a grown-up game of dress-up—a consumer can literally transform herself into something worthy of a Disney dreamscape. (Sweeney 7).

Both the narratives being explored by Disney and the products being offered by the company reflect an interest in the 'grown-up girl' who was a child during the Disney Princess boom of the 1990s. What Hains describes as "Princess Culture," intended to introduce young girls to Disney consumerism, is also always operating at a level where it is designed to appeal to already adult fans who have already been seduced by Disney's charms. The wedding gowns, expensive jewelry, and ball-themed outings available for older girls and women are extensions of the princess dresses, toy jewelry, and trips to Disneyworld that are part of that continual process of seduction, and, by association, part of imagining, and, of course, selling, a universal girlhood that can continually be accessed again via consumption. The fact that some grown-up girls are still 'playing' Cinderella, nearly a century after her clearly patriarchal tale of romance was first a hit Disney film, speaks not only to the business acumen of the Disney corporation but to the prevalence of the Disney Princess narrative's association with both 'innocent' fun and the consummation of feminine identity.

It therefore seems useful to turn, in this context, to a contemporary, live-action, 'grown-up' version of *all* of these princesses as represented in the Disney-produced television series *Once Upon a Time* (2012—). *Once Upon a Time* epitomizes Disney's contemporary multifaceted relationship with its multi-generational presumed girl audience — and its awareness of contemporary discourse on girlhood and feminism. *Once Upon a Time* is, in essence, a rewriting of Disney's already rewritten adaptations of fairy tales — and this version is directly situated in a postfeminist context, designed to appeal to an audience that might be critical of the Cinderella Complex, or actively indoctrinated in "Princess Culture" and, in particular, interested in reexamining matrilineal relationships.

Certainly, in Disney's first full-length animated feature in 1937, *Snow White* embodied the virtues of the early Disney princess — kind, patient, compliant — and the evil stepmother is unquestionably domineering and cruel as well as terrifyingly beautiful. Their fairy tale world is the typical pseudo-medieval fantasy of castles and natural beauty. But almost a century later, in *Once Upon a Time*, these central characters — Snow White and stepmother Regina — are very different, and, rather than being set in a fairy tale world, the action takes place in a small American town in 2012. Storybrooke,

Maine, is inhabited by all sorts of fairy tale characters, from Cinderella, to Rumpelstiltskin, to Jiminy Cricket, none of whom know that they are fairy tale characters at all, due to a spell that has also frozen them in space and time. The Snow White story is especially central to this pastiche because these characters are collected in Storybrooke by a spell cast by the proverbial wicked stepmother herself. Reinforcing Zipes' point that Disneyfied fairytales have "insinuate[d] [themselves] into [our] lives as 'natural history'" (73) are the Disneyfied aesthetics apparent in the costume and set design of *Once Upon a Time*. Belle, from the "Beauty and the Beast" story, appears in a yellow ball gown; Alice is incorporated as a fairytale and appears in blue and white. This extends even to small idiosyncrasies. One important object for the narrative is a chipped teacup similar in appearance to the characterized cup "Chip" from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Such citations are taken for granted as innately intersecting elements of the fairy-tale universe as we know it, but one created not by the brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen, but by Disney.

This retelling relies on the assumed familiarity of the audience with past Disney films — with princess films being the most crucial. The audience is positioned as one familiar with the films of the 1990s — an age group which could extend to people (probably female, probably American) in their early 40s and clearly, especially with the PG rating, does *not* include small children. This audience, then, could be expected to have been exposed to the postfeminist discourse of Girl Power as well as the "Princess Culture" that appropriated it. Most importantly, the audience is expected to take for granted that a fairy tale world would be one easily populated by both Little Red Riding Hood — who has no connection with Disney and is, in this series, a werewolf — and *Disney's* seven dwarves or that Rumpelstiltskin could easily be the Beast to *Disney's* Belle. In other words, the assumed audience is expected to make absolutely no differentiation between Grimm, Andersen, Perrault, and Disney. In some ways, this is part of a larger trend, inspired by digital media and fan fictions, toward the transmedia appropriation of authorship of popular texts; a disconnection from the necessity for 'authenticity,' which can be seen in novel series that continue the storyline of *Star Trek*, or indeed new films that rewrite original plots (see Jenkins 2012). This allows the readers/viewers to feel they participate in and control the narratives (Jenkins 68), but this intertextual amalgamation also points to the way that Disney has managed to create a corporate monopoly over fairy tale storytelling to the point that the assumed audience is not expected to know where fairy tales end and Disney begins.

Set partly in real-time America and partly in flashbacks to a fairy-tale world, the story of *Once Upon a Time* begins with a ten-year-old boy, Henry,

who seeks out Emma, the mother who gave him up for adoption as a baby. This 'real' world, with no particular connection to fairy tales or Disney, is already framed by questions about its reality by the name of the series, the name of the town he has run away from, and of course the marketing of the series. There is thus no suspense surrounding the revelation that Henry is the only person who can leave Storybrooke because he was born outside it, in the 'real' world. Henry finds Emma and tells her that his stepmother is evil and that she needs to come with him to break the spell that binds the town. Emma is at first reluctant to establish a bond with a son she has not seen since he was born, but in attempting to return him to his adoptive family, she begins to suspect that Henry's stepmother, Regina, is not all that she seems. Emma becomes protective, and an informal custody battle begins. Meanwhile, Henry informs Emma that her new best friend, Mary Margaret, is actually Snow White — and also Emma's own mother. No one knows how Emma can break the spell, but Henry feels that the first step is to make her *believe* in his story and her connections to all these characters, so he begins reading her stories from a mysterious magical book that slowly unravels the dark magical-world history of their family tree. There are numerous questions at the heart of Storybrooke's mystery: Why did the queen cast the spell? What is the root of her hatred for Snow White (one of the main heroines) and how will Emma (the other heroine) break the spell so everyone can live happily ever after?

Clearly such a plotline centered on relations between generations of women draws both on the gender narratives of contemporary Disney princess stories and on the cultural resonance of earlier ones. The 'fairy tales' appropriated for *Once Upon a Time* include Disney's original story, *Frozen* (any pretense that this narrative thread is based on Andersen's "The Snow Queen" is dismissed by her appearance as a villain in the series in opposition to Elsa and Anna); an interestingly blended Peter Pan story which draws on both Disney's telling of J.M. Barrie's tale and a sinister retelling of "The Pied Piper" where Pan/The Piper steals children; and Alice in Wonderland, which eventually became the spin-off series *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland* (2013). While sometimes new backstories for characters are introduced, which revise their intertextual reference to both early fairy tales and Disney retellings, for the most part characters are introduced in a way that assumes a familiarity with an array of fairytales that gives the narrative meaning. But whether considered with attention to intertextuality or not, the story of *Once Upon a Time* hinges on the story of Snow White.

The main structure of the Snow White tale embedded within this compendium of adaptations and citations is similar to the 'original' Disney

version. There are seven dwarves; Regina, the stepmother, has a magic mirror; and Snow White dies and is reawakened by 'true love's kiss.' The key difference is that, in *Once Upon a Time,* the reason for Regina's hatred of "Snow," as Mary Margaret is called in the fairy-tale frame narrative, has nothing to do with vanity. The trauma that turned her into the 'evil' queen we see in the present-tense American story is revealed in a series of flashbacks in which Regina, once full of kindness and innocence, is manipulated into a marriage with the king by her domineering mother, Cora. By means of magic, Cora causes the young Snow to have a riding accident from which Regina saves her. As Snow has recently lost her mother, the two immediately bond and Snow's father, the grateful king, proposes.

Although Regina tells Snow she wants to be her mother, she confides that she is in fact in love with the stable boy, and, fearful of her own mother Cora's strong magic and unpredictable nature, she begs Snow to keep it a secret. Snow struggles with Regina's wishes but agrees until Cora eventually manipulates her into revealing this secret in this exchange:

> Cora: It warms my heart how you two share everything… Already. Perhaps, you could share something with me. Why has she pulled away from me?
>
> Snow: What do you mean?
>
> Cora: A mother knows her daughter. Regina's pulled away. I love her so much, but she's not letting me help her. And I…I know she's unhappy. Has she said something? I'd do anything to make her happy.
>
> Snow: You'd do anything?
>
> Cora: Of course, dear. You know, I talked to the King about your mother. He told me how much she loved you. Losing her must've been so hard.
>
> Snow: It was.
>
> Cora: Hearing him, I realized he might as well have been talking about me and Regina. I don't want us to lose each other. If only I could show her how I feel. That, no matter what, all I want is her happiness.
>
> Snow: Then, don't make her get married…She loves someone else. She made me promise not to tell…But she'll lose you. She can't lose her mother. No one should.
>
> Cora: Oh, sweet Snow. It's alright. She won't lose me. You can tell me. You must tell me. ("The Stable Boy" [1.18])

Cora then follows Regina to the stables and kills the stable boy on the spot. Regina finally cannot forgive Snow for this betrayal, and when Snow herself discovers true love, Regina vows to deprive her of it in any way possible.

The conflict at the center of the rivalry between Snow White and Regina

interestingly contrasts with the problems at the center of the traditional Snow White tale. Whereas in the original story the main issue at the heart of this troubled relationship was the (step) mother's struggle to accept that her power might be limited by Snow White — by admiration for her beauty and amiability but also by the threat she poses to her control over the throne and land — what characterizes the relationship most closely established as a parallel in *Once Upon a Time* is the daughter's difficulty in navigating the subjectivity of the (step)mother.

Of course, the fact that the mothers in these stories are in fact *step*mothers is important. Shuli Barzilai points out that the presence of so many stepmothers in Grimm fairy tales, for example, speaks to the high rate of deaths in childbirth at the time of these stories, with children often being left with stepmothers whose love for their adopted children was, at least for the Grimm Brothers, clearly questionable (Barzilai 516). The queen in the original Snow White tale is obviously figured as an impostor who fails to replace the true mother, the original loss of whom is thus all the greater. The fact that in *Once Upon a Time* and other contemporary texts the stepmother is no longer demonized so completely would, in this context, seem understandable in an era when families have many more complex reasons for separation, and stepmother-daughter relationships are often triangulated as mother-daughter-stepmother relationships. But more importantly, the near-obsessive focus of *Once Upon a Time* with maternal reconnections — Henry-Emma, Emma-Snow, Snow-Regina, Regina-Cora, and even eventually Henry-Regina — suggests that contemporary cultural discourse is equally concerned with *symbolic* matrilineal relations.

Mother-daughter relationships have now long been understood to undergo their greatest crisis in adolescence, tied directly, since Freud, to stories about girls and women's changing social expectations. This is also especially relevant when it comes to the production and articulation of a feminist identity. In accounting for Dowling's own Cinderella Complex, Dowling claims that "Without an adequate role model - one that presents autonomy as necessary to feminine identity rather than inimical to it — the modern woman is in a deep psychological quandary" (41). If the mother fights against the autonomy of the daughter, trying to maintain the bond of infancy between them, the daughter cannot move forward. This is key to many of the plots of the most recent Disney Princess films. Unlike Ariel and Jasmine, who faced absent mothers and overbearing fathers as obstacles to their independence, *Tangled's* Rapunzel (2010) features a false mother who literally wants to imprison her because physical contact between them maintains her youth. Merida, too, must reconcile with her mother and persuade Queen Elinor that Merida living a life she chooses with relative autonomy will not be a threat to their family, or to a broader social

status quo for which the mother is also responsible.

In *Once Upon a Time*, the sequence of broken maternal relationships plays out to detrimental effect for everyone involved. Snow, on the verge of adolescence and having been forcibly separated from her own mother, has difficulty negotiating the problematic posed for her by Cora. The decision to tell Cora Regina's secret so that Cora does not lose her daughter — and, importantly for her, so that Regina does not lose her mother — is further complicated by Snow's desire to possess Regina as her own mother. But her decision to tell effectively robs Regina of her own independence, forcing her to marry the king and, clearly, earning Snow her eternal loathing.

Regina's plan to punish Snow involves destroying her happiness in turn. Eventually Snow marries her own true love, and has a daughter, Emma, the prophesied savior of the kingdom from Regina's foretold curse. The spell Regina casts forces Snow to give up her baby and puts Prince Charming in a coma while, of course, erasing Snow's memories of the entire story, turning her into Mary Margaret, who lives in Storybrooke perpetually single and perpetually childless. Having lost both her mother and her daughter, Snow has essentially been rendered powerless, unable to achieve a whole identity as an autonomous individual, positioning her as, Kristeva might say, "a continuous separation; a division of the flesh" (178). Insofar as it is centrally an adaptation of Snow White, I am proposing that *Once Upon a Time* explores the trauma of the separation of mother and daughter in a way that reflects a changing feminist account of relations between generations of women, one that works within a Disney context to convey a need to reconcile girls-that-were with girls-that-are.

This fraught interpretation can also be applied to several of the contemporary Disney films I highlight above as such, alongside other popular (non-Disney) Snow White adaptations. The live-action feature films *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Mirror, Mirror* (2012) both debuted in the same year that Once Upon a Time premiered. The fact that this particular fairy tale is currently such a popular narrative for adaptation is significant, and it is notable that these adaptations often soften and sympathize with the stepmother as much as they stress newly active sorts of heroism for Snow White. Together, I think they imply that our current cultural moment is one in which mother-daughter relationships are freshly important to the story of girlhood triumph on which the Snow White story must at some level always center.

This relevance seems, at least in part, a product of the way in which feminist discourse has narrated its own history in terms of generational 'waves' at odds with each other. In this context, mainstream popular culture currently aligns mothers with the second wave, rather than with what came before

recognizable forms of feminism, and daughters, with a third wave skeptical about some of the mother's earlier claims and more inclined to individual stories than to overarching stories about systemic power. Such a polarizing simplification disenfranchises both parties in different ways. I would argue that the postfeminist context, in both isolating girls as key consumers of feminist as well as anti-feminist accounts, yet also positioning them as vulnerable innocents (at risk, perhaps, of being taken in by hegemonic norms perpetuated by Disney), has contributed in important ways to this discourse, and that texts like *Once Upon a Time* offer speculative stories about past, current and future renegotiations of these generational relations.

"The subject of feminism," as Catherine Driscoll points out, "presumes the desirability of its own re-production" (2). The legacy handed down to the *girl* is conditional upon the necessity of her approaching feminism in the same way and with the same intentions as her foremothers, precluding any recognition of the *girl's* possible difference. If this is the case, the *woman* then falls into the trap of the original Snow White's wicked stepmother, staring into the mirror and hoping to see her daughter reflected only as a part of her own image, and never expecting to see her as a separate, agentic individual. What will happen to her when the *girl* becomes a *woman*? She, of course, will be replaced, relegated to the pointlessness of the past – much like Cora in *Once Upon a Time,* who, for all of her attempts to facilitate her own version of her daughter's happiness, is ultimately punished by banishment.

The conception of the girl as incomplete, as an ageless symbol of "exemplary instability" (Driscoll 60) in need of direction has helped incorporate feminism into a custodial society, in which leading the girl toward an outward model of 'correct' selfhood is a major concern. And perhaps this is the driving force behind the kind of maternal dramas that characterize fairy tales today and make them different from their previous incarnations. By attempting to mend broken relationships by exploring the girlhood traumas of the mother (Snow/Emma) and the stepmother (Regina), *Once Upon a Time* historicizes and contextualizes these generations in ways that suggest present anxieties while allowing for the co-presence of multiple generations of girls/women. *Once Upon a Time* becomes the story of several *girls* and the generational tensions that characterize relations between them. In fact, this is a story of generational collapse. Emma and her mother are *the same age* because of the spell that had both separated them and had frozen Snow in time. They are, therefore, living out the same crises and dealing with the same issues, despite remarkably different histories. A longing for not only maternal but more specifically *generational* reconciliation is clearly suggested.

Considering how this might work as an allegory for contemporary feminist discourse, among other things, it is worth noting that the generational mother-daughter binary has certainly not been productive for the women's movement. As Henry argues, "The ubiquitous focus in recent feminist discourse on generational differences between women has ensured that much energy has gone into internal conflicts within feminism rather than external battles against sexism, racism, and homophobia, among other pressing concerns" (183). A renegotiation today of how postfeminist discourse draws on such binary opposition between generations would require a reexamination of the way we regard girlhood. As Driscoll argues, "If feminist narratives…were deprived of feminine adolescence as vulnerable object…if, instead, they had to refer to strength, disruption and transformative potential…they would be very different narratives" (132). If the anxiety surrounding questions about how to deal with the postfeminist girl 'problem' was rethought as anxiety about generational relationships within feminism, then more recognition of girls' potential for autonomous selfhood might be possible without requiring a rejection of existing feminist discourse or already powerful feminist voices. Perhaps, then, a princess story like Snow White would not be one of the most popular girl-centered stories of the last few years.

While Disneyfied fairy tales have provided us with many texts about girls, girl-centered explorations of mothering are still new territory. It is for this reason that the character of Emma in *Once Upon a Time* is so intriguing. Emma functions both as mother and daughter in the central narratives, and her primary character arc reconciles motherhood with her identity as a young woman surrounded by possibilities (including romantic ones). While in the beginning she is a fiercely independent young woman, a city girl married to her career with no maternal inclinations, Emma eventually chooses to put her career on hold to engage further with her son, but in the speculative frame of this fantasy story, this choice is coded as simultaneously saving multiple worlds and redeeming multiple lives.

Clearly we could read this as packaging a pre-feminist choice in the feminist clothes of the girl power hero. This could, that is, be the "new traditionalism" Angela McRobbie (2008) criticized, a return to patriarchal values masked as an enfranchised decision available to the empowered young woman. But my argument here suggests another significance to this assembled narrative of maternal tensions and reconciliations. *Once Upon a Time* represents a concern in the broader terrain of popular speculative fiction and film today, speculating on how the current generation of putatively 'postfeminist' girls, who grew up along with the rise of "Princess Culture," might reconcile motherhood with their own identities. The heroines of these stories offer the audience points of identification, not confined to one generation, with subject positions that can escape the

anxiety of confinement to the mother's role, and even absorb motherhood into a postfeminist life narrative, which is necessarily that of a girl. These texts also attempt a reimagining of generational relations between women and girls of many ages unthinkable within the stories of the Disney princesses of the 1980s and 90s.

Of course, as fairy tale characters, even more than as fictional characters, Mary-Margaret, Emma, Regina, and even Henry, have the luxury of existing in a place outside of many important social limitations — and often outside of temporal bounds. They are Disney characters, informed by their Disneyfied past. As Disney has made clear, however, revision is both possible within the Disney-verse, and in many cases an integral part of continuing the power of any fairy tale. The fantasy world they inhabit makes possible any life trajectory for these girls, which only makes it more striking that the paths they choose are often so clearly tied to dominant contemporary discourse on femininity. *Once Upon a Time* makes a conscious show of throwing off the romantic shackles of the "Cinderella Complex." In place of the compliant girl waiting to be rescued by love, we have an emotionally unavailable, "can-do" heroine uninterested in looking (or waiting) for love. The main love stories are those of Emma's love for Henry and Emma's love for Mary-Margaret — that is, Emma as mother and as daughter. *Once Upon a Time* is the story of Emma foregoing her real-world life as an independent city girl to find her place at the center of a (small town) familial chain, and in doing so, discovering a more complex and more fulfilling subjectivity. It is certainly true that, in many ways, this decision reflects the dilemma attributed to the 'have-it-all' postfeminist woman — how to be a mother and a daughter in a postfeminist context that is, in some respects, inhospitable to both. But the significance of recrafting girl-centered princess narratives to focus on recovering matrilineal bonds nevertheless suggests something significant also visible elsewhere in Disney's capitalization on new gender norms.

Perhaps the central conclusion to be drawn from this transformation of the fairytale princess heroine from Grimm to Disney, and then to a quite different Disney in turn, is that these renovations renegotiate what it means to be, and to have, a mother. With the humanization of the 'Evil Queen' characters, it becomes clear that the villainous female (familial) competitor is no longer such a viable story for popular culture images of mothers and sisters, even in the fantasy forms that have buoyed the Disney princess boom since the 1990s. The marked trend towards an emphasis on sisterly or motherly relationships in girl-directed and girl-centered Disney films suggests an audience less interested in the mother-daughter split, and more interested in reconciliation between mothers and daughters, or between sisters, and in complicating generational certainties. Who, what, and what age a princess is now seems to be more complex a question than ever before.

Hopefully, this trend will continue, away from one-dimensionality and toward a broadening of the scope of what "Princess Culture" might mean.

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